ELL Reader

Social Studies

Genre	Build Background	Access Content	Extend Language
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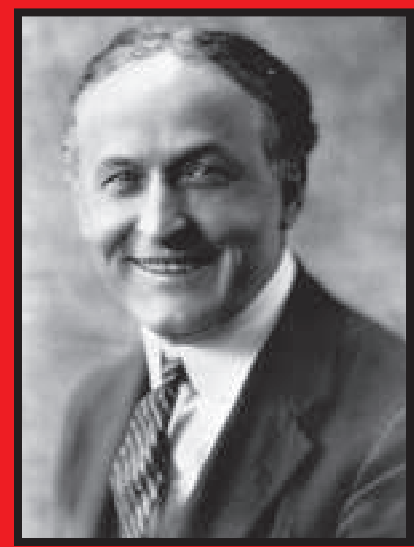


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Two Master Magicians: Robert-Houdin and Houdini

by Alicia Morton







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Did you ever wonder how magicians do their tricks? That's how the famous magician, Harry Houdini, got his start—by wondering. Like many children, Harry went to magic shows and was amazed to see people disappear in puffs of smoke. He wanted to know how magic tricks were done. He studied books on magic tricks and practiced until he could do these tricks himself.

Where did Houdini get his ideas? One of the books he read was by the magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin. Although Robert-Houdin died before Houdini was born, he became an important person in Houdini's life.

magicians: persons who do tricks to entertain





Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin



Harry Houdini



Robert-Houdin was a French magician, known as "The Father of Modern Magic." He was the first magician to use science as part of his act. Houdini admired Robert-Houdin so much that he created his own stage name by adding an *i* to the end of Houdin.

Harry Houdini's real name was Ehrich Weisz. He was born in Hungary in 1874 but came to America when he was young. We remember Houdini today mostly as a fearless escape artist.

How did Robert-Houdin and Houdini become such masters of tricks? What were their shows, or performances, like? Read on to learn more.

escape artist: person who escapes from being tied up or locked up





Houdini called himself "The Handcuff King" because he could escape from any handcuffs put on him.



Masters and Magic

"Magic" tricks really are tricks of illusion—making things look different from what they truly are. Robert-Houdin of France and Houdini in America became master magicians in very different ways. But one thing was the same—they both invented new ways to delight and surprise people with their tricks.



Robert-Houdin

Although Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin loved magic as a child, he did not become a stage magician until he was 40 years old. Robert-Houdin first learned magic tricks as a young man because of a mistake. He was looking for a book on clocks, but a careless bookseller gave him a book on tricks instead.



After reading the book, Robert-Houdin started practicing the tricks he had learned. He worked hard to train his hands to move very quickly. He did not want people to discover how he did his tricks.



Magicians draw people's attention to something besides the trick so that the audience can't see how the trick works.



The Disappearing Person Trick

Here is how Robert-Houdin performed one of his most famous tricks. In "The Disappearing Person" trick, Robert-Houdin performed in front of a large backdrop of black velvet. A smaller screen, also of black velvet, was placed in front of the large backdrop. The audience could not tell that the smaller screen was there. The trick worked like this:

- Robert-Houdin's assistant stood close to the edge of the smaller screen.
- When Robert-Houdin twirled his cape between the assistant and the audience, the assistant quickly stepped behind the screen.
- When the cape dropped, the assistant had disappeared! That is what the audience thought.



backdrop: a cloth hung across the rear of the stage

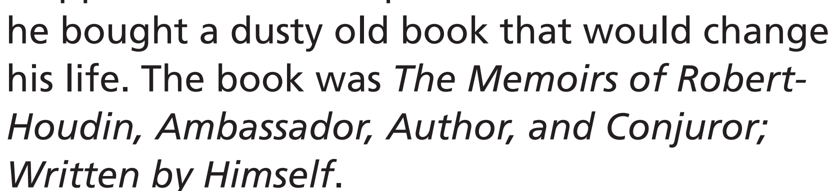


Houdini



Harry Houdini's family was very poor. Like many immigrant children of the time, he had to quit school and work to help his family. He was interested in doing magic tricks, but he was not ready to have a career as a magician.

For a while Houdini worked at the same necktie factory where his father worked. One night on the way home, he stopped at a bookshop. There he bought a dusty old book that would change his life. The book was *The Memoirs of Robert-Houdin, Ambassador, Author, and Conjuror; Written by Himself*.



Houdini was getting tired of working at the necktie factory. He was hoping to turn his hobby of performing magic tricks into a way to make money. He wanted some new tricks to practice. When he read the book by Robert-Houdin, he got more than magic tricks. He got to know about Robert-Houdin, who seemed to love magic tricks as much as Houdini did.

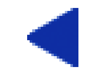


Houdini performed all kinds of magic tricks, but he became most famous for his escapes. By learning everything he could about how locks work, Houdini taught himself how to get out of any locked container or chains put on him. Sometimes he would go to a police station and have the police put him in as many pairs of handcuffs as they wanted—and lock him in jail. Then he would escape from the handcuffs and the jail, sometimes in just a few minutes!



Harry Houdini is inside a packing case being lowered into New York Bay, 1914. He escaped in two minutes and fifty-five seconds.

Houdini also trained his body in ways that would help him in his most dangerous escapes. He learned to hold his breath for three minutes and to withstand very cold water temperatures. These skills were important when he was chained and handcuffed and thrown into icy rivers.







Wonderful Tricks



Robert-Houdin and Houdini made magic tricks wonderful in different ways.

Robert-Houdin was the first magician to use science in his tricks. He was also the first to wear elegant evening clothes during his performances. Before him, magicians performed in long robes and pointy hats. Robert-Houdin also made his tricks seem easy—he acted as though it took no effort to do them.

Houdini made magic tricks suspenseful and physical. He trained himself to be athletic and strong. Unlike Robert-Houdin, Houdini made his escapes seem as difficult as possible. When he was locked up, he squirmed and made faces to show how hard he was working to escape. Sometimes he was already free of his locks and just pretended to struggle. He thought it made his act more dramatic, and he was right.

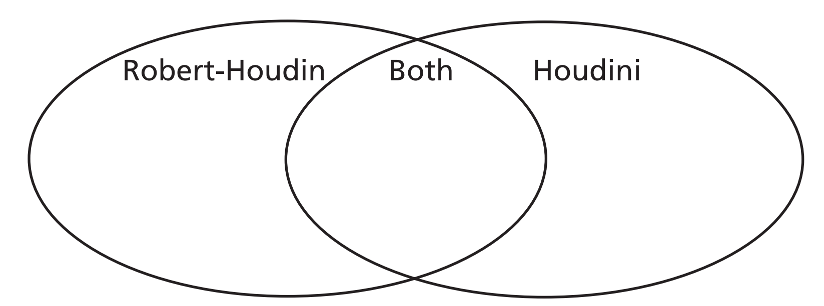
Now that you know about Robert-Houdin and Houdini, what do you think is most interesting about their performances?

Talk About It

1. Read page 5 again. How did Robert-Houdin seem to make a person disappear?
2. What did Houdini do to train or get ready for his escape tricks?

Write About It

3. Use a Venn diagram to compare Robert-Houdin and Houdini. Write your diagram on a separate sheet of paper.



Extend Language

Performers can amaze people with tricks. To *amaze* is to *surprise* someone greatly. Which of these verbs has a meaning like *amaze*?   astonish   bore

Illustrations: 4, 5 Deborah White.

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